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### Over my dead body: Multicultural social cohesion in Veronica Mars

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## Over my dead body: Multicultural social cohesion in Veronica Mars

### Abstract

This paper argues that Veronica Mars foregrounds the notion that multiculturalism is a "field of accumulating whiteness," to borrow Ghassan Hage's phrase, and that multicultural cohesion exists primarily when Brown and Black bodies gain cultural and symbolic capital by accumulating Whiteness.

### Keywords

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# Alice's Academy

## Over My Dead Body: Multicultural Social Cohesion in Veronica Mars

Debra Dudek

*Debra Dudek received her PhD in literature from the University of Saskatchewan, Canada. At present, she is a Research Fellow at Deakin University in Melbourne, Australia, where she works collaboratively on an ARC-funded project, which analyses multiculturalism and Children's Literature. She has published internationally on Children's Literature, Postcolonial Studies, and Comparative Literature.*

The title of my paper constructs a violent ambiguity that can be read as a statement which is both for and against multicultural social cohesion. Firstly, it suggests that Lilly Kane's murder in Season One and the bus crash in Season Two, in which eight people die, are the events through which multicultural society coheres. In other words, diverse groups of people unite over a common tragedy. Because (lily-white) Lilly has lovers across racial and class divisions, her death opens a space of mourning, which enables conversation across difference to take place. Similarly, after the bus crash, diverse communities mourn their joint loss and work together to solve the murder. Secondly, my title puns on the phrase "over my dead body," suggesting that multicultural social cohesion will never take place in Neptune, no matter how many dead bodies surface. In this paper, I argue that Veronica Mars foregrounds the notion that multiculturalism is a "field of accumulating whiteness," to borrow Ghassan Hage's phrase, and that multicultural cohesion exists primarily when Brown and Black bodies gain cultural and symbolic capital by accumulating Whiteness.

As Bullen, Parsons, and Dudek outline in the introduction to this Special Issue of "Alice's Academy," Hage extends Pierre Bourdieu's field of power into a field of Whiteness, and, in this paper, I examine the town of Neptune, in which the series *Veronica Mars* is primarily set, as a field of Whiteness in which various forms of capital circulate. When I use the term "Whiteness," I employ Hage's definition, which he develops in *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society*. Hage aligns a desire for cultural capital with a yearning to accumulate Whiteness, which he emphatically distinguishes from being White:

'Whiteness' is an everchanging, composite cultural historical construct. It has its roots in the history of European colonisation which universalised a cultural form of White identity as a position of cultural power at the same time as the colonised were in the process of being racialised. . . . As such, no one can be fully White, but people yearn to be so. It is in this sense that Whiteness is itself a fantasy position and a field of accumulating Whiteness.  
(58)

My argument centres around the idea that in Neptune, African-American characters have accumulated Whiteness to the extent that their racialisation overtly disappears beneath their cultural and symbolic capital. Consider, for instance, that in two complete seasons or forty-four episodes, there are only two instances when attention is drawn to a character's Blackness (unlike the repeated acknowledgement and demeaning of Latina and Latino characters' race).<sup>[1]</sup>

Drawing on Bourdieu's concepts of symbolic and cultural capital, which are outlined more fully in Bullen's article in this issue, Hage argues that feelings of national belonging occur when a person or group

accumulates cultural capital, which then translates into symbolic capital when that person or group is recognised and validated by the dominant national culture (53). This cultural capital can be achieved through elements such as appearance, demeanour, cosmopolitanism, sporting prowess, and musical skill. If viewers of *Veronica Mars* agree with me that Neptune High school—as a racially and economically diverse community that is nevertheless run by a wealthy white minority—becomes a metonym for the larger town and arguably for America itself, then a reading of the race dynamics within the high school can extend to comment on national identity and belonging, which Hage's theory fruitfully illuminates.

On the surface, the town of Neptune is divided into the extremely wealthy and those people who work for them, and racial divisions coincide with geographical and economic distinctions creating tensions between these upper and lower classes. [2] Accordingly, the show sets up a similar oppositional spatial structure to the one in *The OC*, which Bullen examines in her article in this issue. In *Veronica Mars*, however, the tensions within rather than between communities and race, class, and familial categories are arguably the most fraught, which opens a space for solidarity across such seeming divisions, and Veronica Mars and her cohorts demonstrate the possibilities for such alliances. Furthermore, the viewer recognises the injustice of the demonisation of the Mexican working-class people, given that the majority of the most heinous acts—including murder, rape, and pedophilia—are committed by wealthy white men.

The main players in the series are Veronica Mars; twins Lilly and Duncan Kane, who were Veronica's best friend and boyfriend respectively; bad boy Logan Echolls, who is Veronica's on-again-off-again love interest; Wallace Fennel, Veronica's new best friend; and Eli "Weevil" Navarro, leader of the PCH Bike Club. The primary person who facilitates conversation across difference is Veronica herself, and it is her loss of Whiteness that transforms her into a hinge figure. When Lilly Kane is murdered and Veronica's father, Keith Mars—then sheriff of Neptune—accuses Jake Kane, Duncan and Lilly's father, of being involved in the murder, Keith is voted out of the sheriff's office, Duncan breaks up with Veronica, and Veronica's mother abandons her husband and daughter. The show relies on Veronica's downward mobility—which is simultaneously a loss of cultural capital and a gain of social capital—in order to provide her with access to other communities and individuals within Neptune; that is, to the working-class and racialised non-09ers. When, in Season Two, Veronica and Duncan reunite (briefly), Veronica repeatedly has to prove that she still occupies her liminal position, that she has not abandoned racialised and working-class communities, that she was not simply "slumming it" for a year until the 09ers welcomed her back.

This transformation of individuals is slightly more subtle and potentially more disturbing when it comes to the show's representation of Black characters, and especially those figures who are also 09ers, such as Terrence and Jackie Cook. As I mentioned earlier, Neptune is racially divided between upper-class primarily White 09ers and working-class primarily Latinos/Latinas. Black characters are an uncategorised Other, however, moving between positions of symbolic Whiteness and stereotypical Blackness. There are five African-American characters who appear regularly in *Veronica Mars*: Wallace Fennel and his mother Alicia (who dates Veronica's father for a while), Wallace's girlfriend Jackie Cook and her father baseball legend Terrence Cook (both of whom join the cast in Season Two), and head of security for Kane software Clarence Wiedman. Each of these characters accumulate Whiteness by virtue of their economic or cultural capital, which is not to say that Black stereotypes do not exist. Although African-American characters may accumulate Whiteness, they do not transcend White supremacist ideologies, to use Hage's terminology.

Tellingly, Black stereotypes and the Whiteness that Black characters accumulate via their cultural and symbolic capital are closely linked. Black characters accumulate Whiteness primarily in one of two ways: by being sporting heroes (or being closely associated with these stars) or by working for uber-White Kane software. For example, Wallace Fennel transforms from reluctant snitch to sports superstar when Veronica intervenes on his behalf to smooth over the tensions between Wallace and the PCH Bike Club and to implicate the Sheriff's Office in a prostitution scandal, for good measure. After this first episode, nothing (not even being "BFF" [3] with Veronica) threatens Wallace's symbolic capital because of his superstar status on the basketball court. Alicia Fennel accumulates Whiteness by working for Kane software (and for being Wallace's mother) [4] and Clarence Wiedman by being head of security for Kane software.

These dynamics hold in stand-alone episodes with characters who appear in only one episode as well as throughout the series as a whole. Whiteness is accumulated by Black characters who occupy positions of power within dominant (White) hegemonic institutions, such as the school, or within stereotypically Black industries, such as sport and music. This dynamic is most fully realised through the characters of Terrence and Jackie Cook, but it is also apparent in episodes such as "Lord of the Bling," in which hip-hop producer "Bone" Hamilton hires Keith to find his missing daughter, Yolanda. One particular narrative arc from Episode Seven of Season One, "The Girl Next Door," characterises these stratified yet complex race politics of *Veronica Mars* as a whole and therefore serves as a touchstone for my argument.

The scene upon which I shall focus my analysis opens with a close-up of a timer showing twenty-two minutes remaining, which sits on the front left of a desk. Parallel to the timer, on the right front corner of the desk is a green apple. These two items frame the torso of the person seated behind the desk, signifying his position as a teacher who follows rules minutely. All the viewer initially sees of this person are Black hands writing with a red pen, arms covered in a light blue long-sleeve shirt, and a torso clothed in a deep blue vest upon which is embroidered in red a Ralph Lauren Polo insignia. The camera slowly pans up to reveal the head and shoulders of Mr Daniels, a middle-aged African-American man with glasses perched on the end of his nose. He looks up from his writing to scan the foreground, which leads to the next shot.

In this shot, Weevil is dressed in a blue plaid shirt under which is visible a white muscle shirt. His right hand is lifted to reveal a heavily-tattooed forearm, his habitus clearly visible on his body (unlike Ryan's in *The OC*, which Bullen discusses more fully in her article). He holds a pencil in his left hand, but instead of writing, he shifts uncomfortably in his seat and looks around the room and specifically at the person seated across the aisle forward and to his left, the back of whose head and neck are visible. The camera shifts from Weevil to this figure, who turns around so the viewer can see that it is Logan Echolls. The camera moves back and forth between them, and then Logan takes his piece of paper and moves it to a place on his desk where Weevil cannot see what is written on it. The camera assumes the viewpoint of the teacher, focusing down the empty aisle to the classroom as a whole; Weevil is pictured in the left row and Logan in the right. This image may seem innocuous, but it highlights the general multiculturalism of the classroom. Logan and a young woman with long blonde hair are situated in the centre of the frame, one of them in each aisle. The other eight students visible in this frame can be read as African-American, Asian-American, or Latina/Latino.

The following conversation then takes place between Logan and Weevil, and together with the exchanges that occur later when they are in detention, characterises how they interact in general. Logan taunts Weevil by saying,

"They teach you manners in ESL"?  
 "If I was gonna cheat, don't you think I'd pick somebody smarter"?  
 "If you was gonna"?

At this stage, Mr Daniels pushes back his chair saying, "Ah, alas, you both get zeros. No talking during test." He walks down the aisle that connects Weevil and Logan and takes away their test papers. Logan mutters under his breath, "Guess Mrs Daniels ain't given it up at home, uh?" to which Mr Daniels turns and replies, "You know, the glow of your father's wealth and celebrity may be enough to sustain you through high school, Mr Echolls, but do you know what it will get you in the real world?" "Please say high school English teacher. Please say high school English teacher," replies Logan, with eyes raised and palms together prayer-style. The camera then quickly pans to Weevil, who laughs at Logan's antics. Mr Daniels turns to Weevil and says, "Mr Navarro. I wonder if you'll find Mr Echolls so amusing ten years from now—when you're pumping his gas. See me after class. Both of you. I'll tell you where to report for detention."

The next scene opens with an overhead shot, so the viewer sees the top of a desk upon which are laid cards in solitaire formation, and Logan's hands flipping the next round. The camera pulls back to show Weevil and Logan in a now-empty English classroom, seated parallel instead of Logan one seat closer to the front of the room. Weevil says,

"You know what I love? I love that I get a zero for talking, when you were the one who was talking to me. You get detention for dissing the teacher in front of everybody, and I get detention for laughing. Let me ask you something."  
 "Is this detention or hell?"  
 "How do you people not make yourselves sick? I mean, it's like you walk on water in this school. For what? It's nothing that you do. I mean, all that matters is who your parents are and the zip code your mom shot you out in."  
 "If I donate to the united Latino pain in the ass fund, will you shut the hell up"?  
 "You like playing with yourself"?  
 "Huh"?  
 "Or you wanna make things interesting"?  
 "What did you have in mind?"

This dialogue opens with Weevil outlining for the viewer the class politics of Neptune and making clear that it is an overtly-constituted and acknowledged ideological structure. The conversational move from class

politics to gambling signals one of Weevil's strategies for accumulating Whiteness: winning money from Logan, a dynamic that recurs in later episodes. Furthermore, a queer reading is not to be overlooked; it is obvious that Weevil is making a masturbatory joke but also that he is asking to play with Logan. This sexual dynamic returns at the end of this episode when Logan notices that Weevil has a tattoo on his back that says, "Lilly." That Logan and Weevil were both in love with and had sex with Lilly unites and separates them by creating a ménage à trois and a competition, in addition to making clear Weevil's yearning literally to accumulate Lilly's Whiteness.

The next image is a close-up of Weevil and Logan's desks, now pushed together so the two young men face each other. Weevil flips up the corner of two cards, the Ace of hearts and the Ace of clubs. To his right, in the centre of the desks, is a stack of money. Weevil, waiting for Logan to play his hand, says,

"You're almost as bad an actor as your father."

"You know that you don't need a diploma to steal hubcaps right? I mean why do you even show up here?"

"Promised my grandmother. I don't break my promises."

"And I mean this—aaaaaaaw."

At this point, Mr Daniels walks in and slams the door behind him, "Is this Reno? Or detention?" "Would you believe the best of both," replies Logan. Mr Daniels takes away their cards amidst mutters of protest. "This is punishment gentlemen, not party time," retorts Mr Daniels. "Well that would explain the absence of balloon animals," smart-asses Logan. "You know the two of you may not have learned respect in the home, but you are going to learn it here. And you now have a full week of detention for me to teach you without luxury time for playing cards." Mr Daniels turns and leaves the room, while Weevil groans and stretches, revealing that the large tattoo on his forearm says, "CASH," which marks his body with a signifier of economic capital and therefore Whiteness.

In this scene, we see that Mr Daniels's position as a teacher at Neptune High demonstrates his validation by a dominant culture, and he also announces his cultural capital through the clothing he wears (a Ralph Lauren Polo vest). Weevil is equally marked by his clothing, tattoos, and shaved head. His discomfort in this social setting is revealed by the way he squirms in his seat, obviously unable or uninterested in focusing on the task at hand (which disappears once the classroom is transformed into a detention room). Logan needs fewer external markers because his cultural capital is naturalised via his social position as the son of a famous movie star. More complex, however, is Mr Daniels's complicity in maintaining stereotypes about both rich 09ers and working-class Latinos/Latinas in order to try to exert and solidify his own place in the dominant structure.

Within these hegemonic structures, however, power shifts, especially for Black characters who have accumulated Whiteness. Later in this same episode, Mr Daniels's power lessens when Logan and Weevil impale his car with the school flagpole, which is repeatedly used throughout the show as a site of humiliation. Several people, including Wallace (in the first episode) and Weevil are duct taped naked to the flagpole in order to demonstrate that others have power over them. While Mr Daniels's physical body is still off-limits to Weevil and Logan, they metonymically humiliate him by damaging his un-prestigious car and by putting it on display in its symbolically-violated state. Through this gesture, Weevil and Logan unite to work against a hegemonic power structure, and Weevil gains cultural and symbolic capital through his alliance with Logan.

Additionally, Logan and Weevil are not held accountable (except in a token way—they have to wash graffiti off school buildings) because Logan negotiates with the principal by using his cultural capital (in this case, the boots of his movie-star father, which he donates to the school as part of a fundraiser) to secure a softer sentence, if you will, for both himself and Weevil. In a similar move to how Mr Daniels's Whiteness is trumped by Logan's, in Season Two, Terrence Cook—and daughter Jackie, by association—lose their Whiteness when Terrence's gambling comes to light and when he becomes implicated in the bus crash (although later exonerated). Indeed, this Season Two episode is one of the two instances in the show's history that foregrounds an African-American character's Blackness. [5]

These ambiguities and contradictions highlight the complexity of the show's treatment of race politics within a multicultural framework. On one hand, lovers, friends, comrades, and even seeming enemies, transcend class and racial divisions repeatedly, while on the other hand, Neptune appears to be stratified along race and class lines, giving the impression that multicultural social cohesion is not achievable. Overall, *Veronica Mars* demonstrates how the accumulation of capital underpins an ideology of race, in which multiculturalism works best when citizens yearn and strive to achieve Whiteness. One of the pleasures of watching the

show, however, is bearing witness to those moments when the mighty stumble due to the combined efforts of Veronica and her cohorts, who transform Neptune into a space that accommodates racial and class difference.

## Notes

1. It will be interesting to see if this argument still holds throughout Season Three, the first episode of which draws attention to Wallace's Blackness. This paper deals with only Seasons One and Two; Season Three started when this article was already in press.
2. The geographical distinctions are between 09ers and non-09ers, which refers to the 90909 zip code in which the ultra-wealthy live.
3. Best Friends Forever.
4. She loses some of her cultural capital, however, when she begins dating Keith Mars, which is made obvious in a confrontation between Alicia and Clarence Wiedman after Wallace places a bug in Clarence's office, at Veronica's request ("M.A.D.").
5. When a cash box containing twelve thousand dollars goes missing at the Winter Carnival, Madison Sinclair implicates Jackie in the theft saying, "You wanna save yourself some time. Start with her. We all saw her. Lurking around." To which Jackie replies, "Lurking? Uh, you mean, standing while Black?" ("Ain't No Magic Mountain High Enough").

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